

THE HELLENISTIC ORIGINS OF BYZANTINE CIVILIZATION

Report on the Dumbarton Oaks Symposium of 1962

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THE theme of this Symposium was suggested by President Pusey, as a suitable gesture of welcome to the members of the Center for Hellenic Studies, newly established in Washington. Obviously, the theme presented many problems of selection in the material to be dealt with, and required more than ordinary pre-arrangement. It was agreed that three main topics—Kingship, Literature, and Art—should be considered in three pairs of lectures, and that a certain amount of preliminary consultation should take place between the lecturers on the corresponding “members” of each pair. In the two lectures on Hellenistic Kingship and Byzantine Sovereignty, this question did not arise, since the same scholar was to deliver both. In the case of the two remaining pairs, on Literature and Art, consultation took place, and certainly assisted in establishing harmony between the “members.” In addition, two introductory lectures on Hellenism and Roman Hellenism were arranged; and a further lecture, on Classical Sculpture in Mediaeval Byzantium, was added, which proved to be one of the most interesting in an informative series.

Professor A. H. M. Jones, Professor of Ancient History at Cambridge University, gave the introductory lecture on “The Hellenistic Age.” He pointed out that the Hellenic emigration eastwards after Alexander’s conquests was numerically small. None the less, the Hellenization of the upper classes in the Near Eastern cities was rapid and thorough, owing principally to the prestige of conquest, the establishment of Greek as the language of administration, the free intermarriage of the immigrants among the local populations, and the introduction of the Greek city-states, which multiplied themselves during all the Hellenistic period.

“Nationalistic” resistance to Hellenism was relatively slight. Except in the spheres of family life and religion, the Hellenistic civilization of the Near East was purely Hellenic, uncontaminated by foreign influences. The permanent features transmitted to Byzantium were the Hellenistic theory of Kingship, literary and rhetorical education, and, of course, the Greek language.

In his second lecture, on “The Greeks under the Roman Empire,” Professor Jones showed that, after the Roman conquest of the Near East, the Hellenistic tradition remained unbroken in the city life of the people. But foreign affairs were henceforth the concern of the Roman imperial government; and the peaceful rivalries between the city-states were often both expensive and hurtful. Hellenism began to lose its character in the fourth century A.D., when, under the influence of Roman law and of the newly established oriental religion, the Hellenistic features of city life began to fade, although language and education survived all changes.

Professor Dvornik lectured next, on “Hellenistic Kingship.” He traced the central fact of Alexander’s Divine Kingship to ideas always current in the royal house of Macedonia, where divine honors had already been paid to Amyntas and Philip. The contribution made to this idea by the Persian court was small. Egypt certainly contributed more, and the Ptolemies exemplified divine kingship more completely than the Seleucids. But even in Greece Platonic and Aristotelian notions held that the perfect monarch was close to the divine; and, as Isocrates reminds Philip, Athens herself had once paid divine honors to Philip’s ancestor Heracles.

In his second lecture, on “Christian Hellenism,” Professor Dvornik traced the steps by which the Hellenistic theory of

Divine Kingship was reconciled with the Byzantine concept of a Single Universal Ruler who "imitated" and personified the Divine Ruler in Heaven. This reconciliation was brought about by the fusion of a number of Hellenistic doctrines. Plato, the Stoics, Philo (who contributed the essential element of the priestly nature of the ruler), Clement of Alexandria, and Lactantius all helped to form the theory, which was ultimately concluded by Eusebius of Caesarea in a comprehensive and logical doctrine which needed no modification thereafter.

In the pair of lectures devoted to Literature, Professor Hadas spoke first on "Hellenistic Literature." He traced the classical origins of its drama, idyll and mime, and emphasized the increasingly learned and bookish character of Hellenistic poetry, in keeping with the taste for scholarship and encyclopedism. The age, however, was essentially one of prose-writing, and especially of history-writing. History was divided into recognized types ("true" or "false" or "imaginative"), and emphasis on individual character gave rise to biography and later to hagiography. Professor Hadas showed how formal epistolography was systematized, and pointed to the enormous influence of the Hellenistic rhetorical education throughout the Near East, where it spread the Greek language and helped to preserve the continuity of Hellenistic tradition.

Professor Jenkins spoke of "Byzantine Literature." He emphasized the decay of poetic feeling at Byzantium, where poetry never rose above rhetorical versification. Rhetorical education, on the Hellenistic model, was the hallmark of a Byzantine gentleman. It was a training in empty artifices and trivialities, but provided a common cultural tradition for a governing class which came from widely differing ethnic stocks. On the other hand, the Hellenistic tradition bore rich fruit in mediaeval scholarship and encyclopedism, and even richer in the splendid line of Byzantine historians, who, true to the precepts of Polybius and Lucian, maintained a high standard of accuracy and objectivity.

Professor Mango lectured next on "Antique Statuary and the Byzantine Beholder." He gave an account of the many pieces of

ancient sculpture to be seen at Byzantium, and showed that uneducated (and some educated) people supposed them to be animate and inhabited by demons. Intellectuals regarded them as subjects for rhetorical description, but the terms of this criticism were borrowed wholesale from antiquity, and applied without discrimination both to classical and to contemporary Byzantine art. In no age of Byzantium were these ancient statues ever the inspiration of an artistic revival.

Lecturing on "Hellenistic Art," Professor Hanfmann gave a vivid account of its enormously wide range and of its essential realism and gusto. Sensuous eroticism and riotous humor were two of its fundamental characteristics. Scenes of daily life (*genre*) tended to take the place of the heroic. Nature was imaginatively conceived and depicted with great technical expertise. Human emotions were violently expressed. Above all, "Hellenistic art is entirely and enthusiastically of this world."

Professor Kitzinger, who spoke of "Byzantine Art," emphasized that it could borrow and exploit only a small fraction of the rich Hellenistic heritage, since Byzantine art had a totally different focus and orientation. Nevertheless, specifically Hellenistic influences, whether surviving or reviving, are seen at all periods: notably in scenes of *genre*, and even in the choice of individual motives, such as that of the "Baby's first bath," so popular in the iconography of the Incarnation. Byzantine rendering of emotion certainly owes much to Hellenistic representation; yet in more solemn scenes the Byzantine artist treats it with a restraint and austerity which one associates with the classical, rather than with the Hellenistic, tradition.

In his concluding remarks, Professor Jenkins said it was clear that the Hellenistic tradition at Byzantium, though tenacious in some departments (as in that of political theory), was by no means all-embracing. This it could scarcely have been, in a civilization which differed so profoundly from the Hellenistic world in outlook, creed, and morality. The Byzantines retained, and jealously adhered to, such educational, literary, and artistic elements of Hellenism as they could understand and approve of,

and seemed to be unaware of any changes in these elements from the ancient days. Yet the Byzantine culture, deprived of the creative force of human emotion and regarding all innovation as vicious, was, in a worldly point of view, far narrower than the Hellenistic; and this conscious rejection of humanism was compensated by a more

intense spiritual life which owed nothing at all to Hellenism, and was frequently at open feud with the pagan tradition. The general result of the lectures had been, rather surprisingly, to illustrate the decline and fossilization, rather than the survival and vigor, of the Hellenistic tradition during the Middle Ages.